Justyna Nyćkowiak[*]

PLAYING DOTA 2: PROFESSIONAL CAREERS
IN E-SPORTS

Introduction

Any game that allows competition with another player can become an e-sports game, however, only a few ones have managed to achieve such a status. It is difficult to determine what conditions a game must meet to become a popular, professional e-sports discipline (Bornemark 2013). This was achieved in the case of DOTA 2 which seems to be an ideal candidate for an e-sports game due to the psychological, economic, technological, and social aspects of its use. Its spectacular success in the e-sports area is interesting not only because of its technological solutions, game mechanics, or the construction of the game world. These factors distinguish it when compared to most e-sports games. However, its impact on what people think about the career path of a professional e-player deserves special attention. The issue of a professional e-sports players' career progression has not been analyzed in detail, judging by the quantitative data collected on e-sports websites. So far, researchers have studied mainly how e-sport teams are formed and managed (Nuangjumnonga, Mitomo 2012; Agarwala and Pearce 2014; Eggert et al. 2015; Buchan and Taylor 2016) or the factors influencing a team's success in MOBA games (Pobiedina et al. 2013a; Pobiedina et al. 2013b; Yang, Harrison and Roberts 2014; Song, Zhang and Ma 2015; Kinkade, Jolla and Lim 2015; Neidhardt, Huang and Contractor 2015, Parshakov, Zavertiaeva 2015). The aim of this article is to analyze selected aspects of professional careers of e-sports players. The article uses the data showing the technological, psychological, and sociological dimensions of professional careers of e-sportsmen on an example of DOTA 2 players.

DOTA 2 was presented in 2011. It had been played as a beta test version until 2013, when Valve released it officially. DOTA 2 is a free-to-play,

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multiplayer online battle arena (MOBA) video game – a real-time strategy game, in which two five-person teams compete to capture the enemy's base by destroying its main building. Within the last seven years, DOTA 2 has become one of the most popular online video games. Together with other games, for example, League of Legends, StarCraft, Quake, or Counter-Strike, it has dynamically gained community support for its professional players, and thus multimillion-dollar cash rewards in the largest tournaments. According to the statistics prepared by Steam (the game distributor), in 2015, the number of concurrent players of DOTA 2 exceeded 1 million for the first time.

The first part of the article presents a theoretical approach to how the author analyzes careers in e-sports. The second part shows desk research and data gathering processes. While in the third part, the results of preliminary research on the course of professional careers of e-sports players in the world of DOTA 2 are presented (selected, objective characteristics of professional careers in the world of DOTA 2 are presented).

Careers in e-sports

The analysis presented in this article focuses primarily on the objective dimension of professional careers and derives from the conceptual apparatus of various disciplines. Any analysis of careers in new professions frequently requires that the conceptual framework be borrowed from several disciplines. M. B. Arthur, D. T. Hall, and B. S. Lawrence (1996) postulated the use of an interdisciplinary perspective, in which they saw chances to adapt the problems within the career theory to the intensely changing macrostructural conditions.

Traditionally, the concept of a professional career involves achieving higher professional positions and performing increasingly complex tasks related to a higher salary. A professional career is thus viewed from the perspective of development, vertical mobility (Tomaszewska-Lipiec 2016), and through the chances of organizational and social promotion. Such an understanding of the concept of a professional career is still very popular, but dynamic social and cultural changes, reflected in the course of professional careers, make researchers question its universal utility. The close link between the notion of a professional career and the concept of career advancement and professional success is challenged by K. Padzik, who claims that a professional career "does not have to mean spectacular professional successes. It can be a gradual professional development manifesting itself in promotions, and / or in the increase of earnings, and / or in learning new market sectors and new activities" (Padzik 2002, p. 33). According to

A. Cybal-Michalska: "The conceptualization of a qualitatively new approach to the issue of career as an individual's property (co-existing with the traditional understanding of career as a structural property of an organization or as a profession) testifies to the multidimensional character of the contemporary discourse combining implications of an interdisciplinary dialogue, and creates the need for a review of theoretical reflections on various ways of understanding career as well as the conditions and determinants of its formation". (Cybal-Michalska 2012, p. 212). The traditional understanding of professional career concepts is not compatible with the description of careers pursued in new occupations, e.g. those related to the development of new technologies. A special type of such a career is related to e-sports.

This article uses the concept of career in the categories of "an evolving sequence of a person's work experiences over time" (Arthur, Hall and Lawrence 1996, p. 8). The use of "moving perspective" in the analysis of e-sports careers emphasized the relationship between intensive social changes resulting from the development of new technologies and the consequences of these changes, evident in the course of individual career paths of e-sports players. An e-player's career will have a procedural character, so it is diverse professional experience (of an e-sports nature), acquired over time, that should be a subject of studies on professional careers of e-sportsmen. It can be said after B. Wojtasik that such a career is a "mosaic of episodes within a professional biography" (Wojtasik 2003, p. 343-351). This corresponds to A. Bańka's thesis that career is "a collection of a series of unique posts, jobs, occupations and professional experience obtained by an individual" (Bańka 2005, p. 23).

In the case of e-sport players' careers, there will be a need for such an analysis of their careers which will account for the possibility of taking different positions, performing different roles and functions, even simultaneously, and in different combinations of constellations. The duration of various functions may, in the case of e-sports players, be relatively short-lived and have an episodic character. The change of a position or role will not be closely related to the concept of promotion, but each of them can be seen as an achievement of a professional success and a result of the mastery of performing a specific role. Therefore, it seems crucial to emphasize the dynamics of professional positions occupied by e-players, which defines the sequence of roles and professional functions (the objective dimension of a professional career). Drawing attention to the subjective dimension of the professional experience among e-players (which is related to the level of their aspirations, job satisfaction, and transformations of self-image as a consequence of their professional activity) would require additional,

deepened research (Hall 2002, pp. 8-10, Kauweloa, Winter 2016).

Data collection

In order to follow the most common career patterns of e-sports players, desk research was carried out. This study lasted from June to August 2017 (the study also included information from the last tournament in the TI series, which took place in August 2017). As part of the study, data were collected that describe the career progression of all the players who took part in at least one of the seven largest tournaments, i.e. The Internationals (in 2011-2017), or in one of the five DOTA 2 official Valve tournaments that may be said to have earned the status of "Major tournaments". This description of the surveyed population was dictated by the conviction that professional e-sporting is most fully expressed through taking part in professional e-sports competitions at the highest level, which depends on a team's achievements or global eliminations during which the best teams in a given season emerge.

The data collected in this way describe the e-sports careers of three hundred and fifty people. The vast majority of players come from Asia, primarily from China. Also, the countries of Eastern Europe, e.g. Ukraine and Russia, are represented by a large group of players. Finally, numerous players from Western Europe and North America have participated in every edition of The International so far.

The information gathered during the research covers: (1) the history of each player's team (for each player associated with at least one team), i.e. changes in belonging to teams within the period of being a member of a given team; (2) the history of participation in tournaments of the TI and Major tournaments series, including the teams represented by a player, the places a player's team took, and the rollover; (3) roles played in the game; (4) roles played in the team, (5) roles played during e-sports events, and (6) the demographic characteristics of the players, including: name, nickname, year of birth, country of origin, the age at which they started playing the DOTA 2 game professionally. Since some gamers' data were unavailable, the analysis presented in this article comments only on the numbers concerning the players about whom complete data could be gathered. The scope of the information available on the career progression of players in the world of DOTA 2 is related to the limited possibility of registering such data from the moment the DOTA 2 game debuted.

The data on which this analysis is based comes from Valve's official website [`http://www.DOTA2.com/play/`]; from joinDOTA, which is a Dota 2-portal dedicated to broadcasting, community, tournaments, news, and the coverage of Dota 2 [`https://www.joindota.com/en/start`]; from the Ste-

am system (owned by Valve) [http://store.steampowered.com/app/570/ Dota_2/]; and from the Liquipedia website [http://wiki.teamliquid. net/DOTA2/Main_Page], which is considered to be one of, if not, the most comprehensive source of information about teams, players, and tournaments organized in the DOTA 2 world. This information is gathered with the help of the members of the community organized around the DOTA 2 game scene. Also, all the analysis contained in this article is based on the author's experience resulting from being an active player at the amateur level.

Professional careers of e-sports players in the world of DOTA 2

Almost half of the examined group members were born between 1991 and 1995 (the youngest professional players were born in 2000, the oldest in 1984), and began to play about 2-6 years ago. Most e-sports players have six years (if they started their careers with the launch of DOTA 2) or three years of professional experience (if they started playing professionally when DOTA 2 already had been well-established as an e-sport).

This means that most of them were nineteen to twenty-three when they started their careers in e-sports. There are also cases of exceptionally early (fifteen years) as well as extremely late (twenty-seven years) career starts. The average age of a player starting an e-sports career is just over twenty years. Today, the youngest professional e-sports players in the world of DOTA 2 are eighteen and the oldest thirty-four years old. The average age of an e-sports player is just over twenty-five years. Over a dozen players can boast with more than ten years of experience in professional e-sports.

The data testifies to a growing popularity of professional e-sports, but also to the fact that this type of activity is not reserved for teenagers. This has far-reaching consequences for the understanding of the role that professional e-sports can play for the entire professional experience of current players. Commitment to the intense training in the skills necessary in the world of DOTA 2 begins before entering the path of professionalism. This means that already before the age of fifteen, some professional players focus on improving their future professional skills. Between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four, they are subjected to intensive professional training. It should be remembered that this period of life is traditionally associated with school education. E-sports players frequently delay their formal education (or resign from it entirely). Lack of formal education in the absence of success in a professional e-sport (which is, of course, associated with the shortage of financial resources) may later cause problems with finding employment on the labour market. On the other hand, it should be remembered that the currently popular long-life learning approach allows modifying one's pro-

fessional path as skills and qualifications may be acquired in later life. It should not be forgotten that some universities already offer courses related to video game design. Obviously, this opportunity can be used by future, current, or even former e-sports players who would like to formally confirm their competence in designing game worlds.

Table 1

Players' age and the length of their professional career

Birth	N	%	Length of professional career (years)	N	%	The age of starting a professional career	N	%
1993	30	13.6	3	57	19.1	20	43	20.1
1992	29	13.1	6	55	18.4	21	36	16.8
1995	27	12.2	4	46	15.4	19	30	14
1991	23	10.4	5	46	15.4	22	30	14
1990	22	10	2	45	15.1	23	26	12.1
1989	19	8.6	8	13	4.3	18	17	7.9
1997	18	8.1	7	10	3.3	17	16	7.5
1994	11	5	10	8	2.7	24	7	3.3
1988	10	4.5	1	7	2.3	26	3	1.4
1996	10	4.5	11	6	2	16	2	0.9
1987	7	3.2	9	4	1.3	27	2	0.9
1998	5	2.3	12	2	0.7	15	1	0.5
1999	5	2.3				25	1	0.5
1986	2	0.9						
2000	2	0.9						
1984	1	0.5						
Sum	221	100.0		299	100.0		214	100.0

Source: own study.

Most professional players started playing in a professional team only when the DOTA 2 game appeared on the market or later. Few of them, have played professionally earlier in other games, sometimes quite different from the DOTA 2 game. However, the rise of their careers in e-sports began only with the development of the DOTA 2 game scene. The history of playing in e-sports teams, in the case of the group researched, is extremely rich. Less

than one-third of professional players have played in four to six teams since they started their professional careers. Almost thirteen percent of all the players have played in more than thirteen teams.

During the preparatory period and over the course of their professional careers, they played in five hundred and twenty-five teams. It needs to be remembered that the collected history involves only three hundred and fifty professional players. It allows us to realize how many people are involved in high-quality e-sports and, at the same time, how few of them reach the professional level.

Only seventy-four teams took part in TI or Major tournaments. Sixteen teams take part in each tournament of the TI or Major rank, which means that potentially as many as one hundred and ninety-two teams may have participated in them. This is another example of how the process of professionalizing the DOTA 2 game scene organizes the space for pursuing careers in professional e-sports. It is worth noting that some of the teams took part in tournaments only once, which further strengthens the statement about the progressive professionalization in e-sports.

In the examined group of professional players, the players whose professional careers are longest and who are associated with regular participation in the largest e-sports tournaments stand out. Almost fourteen percent of professional players participated in four or more The International tournaments, and more than twenty percent in three or more Major tournaments. This means that they took part in more than half of the largest tournaments in the world of DOTA 2.

Table 2

Number and percentage of players by official Valve events

Number of TIs	N	%	Number of Major tournaments	N	%
0	49	14.0	0	158	45.1
1	170	48.6	1	77	22.0
2	56	16.0	2	41	11.7
3	27	7.7	3	46	13.1
4	15	4.3	4	15	4.3
5	19	5.4	5	13	3.7
6	9	2.6			
7	5	1.4			
Sum	350	100.0		350	100.0

Source: own study.

It is also worth investigating what the participation of professional play-ers in e-sports tournaments looks like in a dynamic perspective. About eigh-ty professional players can participate in each tournament. The data on the participation of players in two consecutive tournaments of the TI rank and on the history of participation in tournaments from the first to the last tournament, TI7, show that at least 37 players participated in consecutive tournaments, and up to 58 (of 80) in two tournaments, i.e. TI3 and TI4.

Table 3

Players' movement between the teams in TIs

	TI2	TI3	TI4	TI5	TI6	TI7	Total
Number of players who changed their team and re-appeared in the next tournament	28	24	30	27	21	22	152 from 480
Number of players who did not change their team and re-appeared in the next tourna-ment	9	25	28	19	16	17	114 from 480
Number of teams that re-appeared in the next tourna-ment	4	8	8	9	8	9	46 from 96

Source: own study.

This means that almost half of the players repeatedly attended each event. This was possible because their teams maintained a high level of playing for at least a year. On the other hand, such situations also result from the changes in team rosters made between the biggest tournaments. In this way, players can participate in a TI tournament by playing in another successful team.

Using the experience gained during professional playing and translating it into playing other roles in teams seems to be an interesting topic for the analysis of career progression in e-sports. The topic concerns primarily combining the experience of playing certain positions with the roles of the captain or coach and with the functions that can be performed during e-sports events, i.e. the roles of an analyst and caster. Most frequently such experience is successfully used by those professional players who play the so-called "support" positions. One may definitely expect that those players

will continue their careers in the world of DOTA 2 in the roles captains or coaches.

Almost thirty percent of the players who performed the role of the captain and over fourteen percent of coaches played support. The situation is similar in the case of people who want to become analysts or casters. Here, also the experience of being a support turns out to be the most useful. Undoubtedly, the role of a support, despite frequently being treated with less attention than the other roles, is associated with the unique opportunity to observe and control the course of the game. People who are predisposed to play the support position prove themselves to be good coaches and team captains. It may be advisable for the players planning to pursue their e-sports careers to make playing support part of their professional experience.

Table 4

Expansion of broadcast talent in TIs

Broadcast talent	TI1	TI2	TI3	TI4	TI5	TI6	TI7
Commentators	8	24	6	16	14	29	29
Host	-	1	1	2	1	3	5
Panelists/Analyst	-	3	4	8	4	22	20
Interviewers	-	-	1	2	2	5	3
Stats/Observers	-	-	-	3	3	6	5
Content Creators	-	-	-	-	-	-	2

Source: Own compilation based on
`http://wiki.teamliquid.net/DOTA2/The\_International` [23.11.2017].

Considering the possibility of further career in professional e-sports, one should think about the expanding range of the roles available to the people participating in the organization of e-sports tournaments. Since 2012, when the role of the commentator was the primary role, almost every year new roles have appeared that can be performed by current or former professional players. Every year, ever more people have played these roles, so it should be assumed that with the development of the DOTA 2 scene, there will be other professional positions that can be taken into consideration by current or former professional players. This creates wider and more stable prospects for the progress in professional careers in e-sports.

Currently, almost every professional team playing DOTA 2 has its own coach, and the management of a team's activity is taken over by dedicated managers. These roles are chosen by the people who have professionally

played DOTA 2 in some periods of their lives, sometimes even successfully. Changes in the way the tournaments are run, their organization, and the frequency with which they have been taking place since 2017, enable the return to e-sports of those players who announced the end of career or previously played coaches or analysts. The increase in the number of major tournaments, and thus in the prize pool for which players will compete in the world of DOTA 2, has mobilized many experienced former players to consider returning to active e-sports, as well as forming new, independent teams.

Summary

Playing video games, especially e-sports ones, is a new professional activity associated particularly with young people, although this situation may change as the e-sports industry develops. Describing the phenomenon of professional careers from the perspective of young people, A. Cymbał-Michalska says: "The world of new careers is the world of numerous 'beginnings' and 'transitions' of individuals. These transitions through subsequent phases are marked both by uncertainty resulting from the transitional 'neither-nor' states experienced by a young person and by the risk related to the social requirements formulated by the outside environment". She also claims that: "The specificity of qualitatively new transformations in the relations between the global and the local, the state and society, society and the individual, and the links between them is not without impact for the organization of socio-cultural, political and economic life" (Cymbał Michalska 2012, p. 193). This has its consequences for the course of professional careers. According to J. G. Maree: "short-term projects become more common than a job in one company for a permanent period [...], and the breakthrough and decisive phenomenon becomes the versatility of qualifications (multi-skilling)" (Maree, 2010, p. 362). In such circumstances, an application of specific professional strategies requires individual choices of professional development paths adapted to the fast pace of environmental changes. In the case of e-sports players' careers, this change of pace greatly determines the possibilities of planning and pursuing specific career paths. This situation can be dealt with by those people who not only represent a professional level of skills in playing an e-sports game, but also have soft skills that enable an intentional and thoughtful management of the course of their professional careers.

If, by a professional career, one understands a sequence of gradually acquired professional experience and occupational positions, a career course of e-sportsmen should take into consideration three dimensions to which

different positions occupied by a professional player and the functions performed in relation to them are assigned at a given moment. The first dimension describes the process of professional preparation (Did the player play as an amateur?, Did the player play other e-sports games?, At what age did the player start a career in a professional e-sports team?). The second dimension concerns the role of players in a professional team (in the case of DOTA 2, these are: a player, team captain, coach, manager, etc.), which position they play during the game (in the case of DOTA 2, there are four main positions: a carry, offlaner, support, solo middle), and what roles they can play when participating in e-sports events (in the case of DOTA 2, these are: a host, commentator, analyst, etc.). The third dimension concerns situations related to a player's decision to end professional playing, while remaining in the game world and performing other roles (related to their work for e-sports teams or during e-sports events).

Each of the described dimensions involves the possibility of taking up various positions and performing many functions (also simultaneously), the scope of which depends on the competence of a professional player and one's professional experience. A preparation for an e-sports career may start in an amateur competition between players from different teams or in a training focused on mastering specific, game-related skills at a selected position in the game (e.g. a support position). Later, one can become a professional e-sports gamer, playing support (or a different position depending on the current needs), who could simultaneously be the team captain/coach/stand-in, and additionally might turn into a panelist/commentator during e-sports events. After ending gaming career, one can remain an active member of a game community by becoming a team manager, setting up their own team, turning into a coach/analyst, or performing other functions related to the organization of e-sports events. All of these activities, or a majority of them, are related to receiving cash prizes or collecting salary.

Thus, it can be said that during the first stage of preparation for a professional career, the player focuses on amateur training, gaining experience by playing for various teams, sometimes playing various video games. In this period, the player can be called a novice. The next stage, after joining a professional team, begins a proper career period. In that period, the player undergoes regular training and adheres to the requirements set by professional team managers (organizational, financial), uses and constantly improves skills in unofficial matches, plays various functions in the game and various roles during e-sports tournaments, depending on the specificity of the position in the team. In this time, the e-sports player becomes a professional. During the third stage, when the activity of now a former e-player focuses

on supporting activities, mentoring, or expert functions, the player can be called a master in the gaming field. The third stage of the career, obviously, does not apply to all e-sports players.

This article investigates the e-sports career from the process and development perspective. From this perspective, professional success may be part of carrier description, it is, however, not treated as indispensable for the course of a career and may be identified only in some cases. Based on the presented data, it can be assumed that most e-sports careers are of a spiral nature (although the period of being engaged in the same occupation will probably be shortened from several years to several dozen or so months) (Driver 1979).

The dynamically growing market of e-sports games and the growing interest in e-sports disciplines allow an assumption that in the future the career path in e-sports will be one of the alternatives considered by an increasing number of young people. On the other hand, taking into consideration the popularity of playing video games in other age categories, it should be assumed that this type of professional activity may in the future also apply to the people who start their e-sports career at a later age.

The data presented in the article, describing objective dimensions of e-sports careers, require further, in-depth qualitative research on the social consequences of involvement in this type of professional activity. The possibilities of practicing e-sports professionally arose only a few/dozen years ago, and the change of pace in this professional area is extremely intense. It seems that observing career trends in e-sports and their social and psychological consequences make a perfect field of interdisciplinary research on the course of careers in new professions.

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Keywords: e-sport, professional career, e-sports players' careers, DOTA 2.

Playing video games, especially the e-sports ones, is one of new professional activities, particularly popular among young people. The analysis presented in this article focuses primarily on the objective dimension of professional careers and uses the conceptual framework of various disciplines. The results show that the application of specific professional development strategies in e-sport requires making individual choices of patterns and paths adapted to intensive social and technological changes. In the case of e-sport players' careers, the pace of changes largely determines the possibilities of planning and pursuing specific career paths. This situation is favourable to the people who not only represent a professional level of skills in playing an e-sports game, but also have the soft skills that enable an intentional and thoughtful management of their profession career paths.

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GRAJĄC W DOTA 2: KARIERY ZAWODOWE W E-SPORCIE

Słowa kluczowe: e-sport, kariera zawodowa, e-sportowe kariery zawodowe, DOTA 2.

Granie w gry wideo, zwłaszcza e-sportowe, należy do nowych aktywności zawodowych, szczególnie popularnych wśród młodych ludzi. Analizy przedstawione w tym artykule koncentrują się przede wszystkim na obiektywnym wymiarze kariery zawodowej i korzystają z aparatury pojęciowej różnych dyscyplin. Wyniki pokazują, że zastosowanie konkretnych strategii rozwoju zawodowego w e-sporcie wymaga indywidualnych wyborów wzorów i ścieżek dostosowanych do intensywnych zmian społecznych i technologicznych. W przypadku osób zawodowo związanych z e-sportem tempo zmian w znacznym stopniu determinuje możliwości planowania i realizacji określonych ścieżek kariery. Ta sytuacja sprzyja osobom, które nie tylko reprezentują profesjonalny poziom umiejętności w grze e-sportowej, ale także posiadają miękkie umiejętności, które umożliwiają celowe i przemyślane zarządzanie przebiegiem kariery zawodowej.